

VZCZCXRO1717  
OO RUEHBI RUEHLMC  
DE RUEHLM #0653 1900928  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 080928Z JUL 08  
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8381  
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0994  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7983  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 6155  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4476  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2154  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4443  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3544  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8589  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6034  
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0705  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2853  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000653

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM MOPS CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TWO PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS SET FOR AUGUST 23RD

REF: COLOMBO 571

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4(b,d).

**¶1. (U) SUMMARY:** The Sri Lankan Election Commission set August 23rd as the date for two Provincial Council elections in the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces. The campaigns in both provinces are likely to revolve around the government's war strategy versus the opposition's emphasis on pocketbook issues, corruption and the rollback of democratic norms. End Summary.

**¶2. (U)** On July 4 the Sri Lankan Election Commission set August 23rd as the date for the North Central (NCP) and Sabaragamuwa Province (SP) elections. The ruling UPFA coalition has nominated incumbents Berty Premalal Dissanayake (NCP) and Mahipala Herath (SP) as Chief Minister (CM) candidates. The UNP has named former Army Chief of Staff Major General Janaka Perera to lead their slate in the NCP, but has yet to name a Chief Minister candidate for SP. (Actor Rajnan Ramanayake, a former Catholic, who converted to Buddhism July 3, is seen as the most likely candidate).

**¶3. (SBU)** The campaigns in these predominantly Buddhist areas will pit the ruling coalition UPFA's support for the government's war strategy against the UNP's emphasis on the cost of living, corruption and the intimidation of civil society during the past two years. The UNP's selection of retired Major General Perera as its standard-bearer in the north is an attempt to insulate itself from the charge that it can't be trusted to take the threat from the LTTE seriously and to help ensure the vote is as free and fair as possible. UPFA political organizers told PolFSN that government rice subsidies have built support in the farming communities that dominate both provinces. They also reported that the largest number of recruits to the army come from the NCP, generating increased income when army salaries are sent home to the villages.

**¶4. (SBU)** The August 23rd vote will also be the first test for former JVP Propaganda Secretary Wimal Weerawansa's new National Freedom Front (NFF) party. NFF's ability to attract JVP voters away from the opposition and to the President's

UPFA coalition will be a key factor determining whether the President's party wins control of both Councils, where the JVP held 10 (SP) and 8 (NCP) seats. The TMVP has included a member in the UPFA coalition's list for the Polonnaruwa district (NCP) where there is a significant Tamil population. UNP leaders report that the TMVP have opened a number of offices in the district.

15. (C) COMMENT: The GSL scheduled these elections partly to take advantage of momentum generated by its success, albeit tainted, in the recent Eastern provincial council elections. While both sides express confidence in their ability to win, the government enters the campaign with the clear advantage of government resources at its disposal and a perception among some voters that their province would receive less support from Colombo if led by the opposition. We anticipate a heated campaign and note that there have already been reports of isolated incidents of violence where those putting up JVP posters in SP have been assaulted. End Comment

BLAKE